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ALUMNI ADDRESS

BY

RAYMOND WALTERS, '07

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ACTION AND REFLECTION

Alumni Address to the
Class of 1920, Lehigh University
by Raymond Walters, '07
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At the outset of this address to you, gentlemen of the graduating class of Lehigh University, I want to disavow any aim of presenting thought that is essentially new. My only hope is to serve, as did the soldiers of David, in drawing water out of the well that is in Bethlehem and also from distant wells. My only assurance is that I myself have tasted of these wells and, finding the waters exceedingly clean and sweet, now hold up a cup for your refreshment and stimulus before you start out on a hard road.

In this our study of the past for guidance in the future let us begin with a word about the debate between two conceptions of man. Classic philosophers from Aristotle down have proclaimed that action is secondary, that man's greatest glory is to be a rational thinker, "to apprehend things noble and divine," to know the absolute. Walter Pater summed up this conception thus: "The end of life is not action but contemplation—being as distinct from doing." Modern science views man as a product of evolution, whose primary concern in life is action. No one has better phrased this view than America's greatest philosopher, who by no means accepted it as the final word. Said William James, of Harvard: "Deep in our own nature the biological foundations of our consciousness persist, undisguised

and undiminished. Our sensations are here to attract us or to deter us, our memories to warn or encourage us, our feelings to impel, and our thoughts to restrain our behavior, so that on the whole we may prosper and our days be long in the land. * * * The brain, as far as we understand it, is given us for practical behavior."

Now, although generalizations are dangerous, I shall risk a generalization and proceed upon it without preliminary comment as to the wisdom of the conception. My two-fold generalization is this: First, that life in the United States during the past fifty years has exemplified the conception that man's primary concern is action; and, second, that Lehigh University during these fifty years has been a typically American educational institution in preparing for action.

This emphasis upon action was a natural consequence of the geographic and economic situation of America. From the hazardous discovery of the continent, through the arduous settlement of the colonies, through the trying revolutionary period, through the pioneer winning of the west, through the mining craze and the railroad expansion of the forties and fifties, America called from the Old World not the philosophic type of man but the adventurous, dynamic man whose motto was Westward Ho! The Civil War further bred action into the national character. And when, at the close of "the iron days" of '61 to '65, a new group of educational institutions was born in the United States, it was almost inevitable that their courses should diverge from the classical system as represented at Harvard and Yale, and should respond to the demand for the

training of men to resume the material conquest of the continent.

The new group included the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Lehigh University, and Cornell University, beginning in 1865, 1866 and 1868 respectively. The "Memorial" laying the foundation of the Massachusetts Institute planned a polytechnic college "to equip its students with every scientific and technical principle applicable to the industrial pursuits of the age." In the first Lehigh "Register" the purpose was set forth to provide, in addition to liberal courses, training for the "young men of the Valley, of the State and of the Country, for those industrial pursuits which tend to develop the resources of the country." Said Ezra Cornell: "I would found an institution where any person can find instruction in any study." The nation needed up-building. A generation of young builders responded. Lehigh, along with the institutions cited and others, furnished a notable share of these builders.

Thus Lehigh has been molded and in turn has helped to mold national life of the past half-century. Lehigh has been American to the core, with the virtues and the shortcomings of America.

Foreign critics used to take care that the United States should not be unaware of its shortcomings. Doubtless there were crudities, callowness, lack of interest in intellectual matters in portions of our population which merited the criticism received. Doubtless there was at Lehigh in certain periods some disregard for the urbanity and refinement of older seats of learning, some neglect of the philosophical aspect of life. These shortcomings

were the shortcomings of a young nation, of a young institution.

The virtues of the nation have been Homeric directness and force, of which Lincoln stands as the finest exponent; with Theodore Roosevelt, I risk saying, as the typical exponent of our own day.

The virtues of Lehigh have been similar, with this characteristic, that she has insisted upon scholastic first-rateness and clean execution, and in so doing she has trained her sons to meet difficulties and to master them. The doctrine and the practice from the first have been: Here, student, is your problem. If you shirk, you do not pass. If you are unqualified for any reason, you do not pass. Lehigh guides and helps. But you solve the problem. Thus, bred by no over-indulgent mother, Spartan sons have been developed. During the war I knew a very able army officer, a graduate of West Point, who declared: "I have noted that when a Lehigh man has a job to do he doesn't come back with an alibi; he comes back with the bacon." It would be easy to starch and iron the phrasing into prettier shape, but the tribute is there and it rings true.

Two practical tenets issue from these traditions of Lehigh. The first is decisive thorough action as a fundamental for the conduct of life. The besetting sin of most of us is dawdling. We ought to attack our tasks promptly. We ought to see them through to a finish. Trite words, these; but unless we make them a living formula there can be no effective strength in us. Your courses at Lehigh have been so ordered as to give you a start in this fundamental. According to the law of the modification of the nerve cells of the brain, you are assured a return with interest

upon the tendencies to act with promptness, concentration and diligence, which you have learned here. But you must pay the daily price of exercising these tendencies in concrete tasks. You should regard every piece of work that comes to your hand as an opportunity to gain power. It is a scientific fact that all work well done today modifies the nerve cells and helps to insure success tomorrow. Achievement begets achievement.

Some qualifications are necessary, of course. You should not confuse this doctrine of achievement with worship of success in the sense of "getting there," at any cost; but neither should you fall into the reverse-Philistinism which scorns wealth and position as such. You must not ordinarily count upon exceptional achievement in those realms of effort about which poor Wagner in "Faust" sighed: "Ach, Gott, die Kunst ist lang (Art is long);" but you ought to remember that "the age when men are eager about great work is the age when great work gets itself done."

We should cultivate the enjoyment of success in doing. When night comes we ought to find our reward, not in the praise of others, although that is pleasant, but in the approval of our critical consciences as we say "Today I achieved," or, in Browning's words, "Today I strove, made head, gained ground upon the whole."

The second tenet based on Lehigh traditions is closely connected with the first. The French have an apt phrase for the thinker who fails in sustained attention; they designate him as one incapable of work, *de longue haleine*,—of long breath. During the war it was demonstrated how much longer is the breath which the aver-

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age man can take—when he has to. Under the spur of necessity and the tonic of a great cause countless men performed a quantity and quality of work of which they never dreamed they were capable. This 1920 class has members whose military exploits illustrate the theory of human energy Professor James put forth before the American Philosophical Association some fourteen years ago: "As a rule men habitually use only a small part of the powers which they actually possess. * * * A nation filled with such men is inferior to a nation run at higher pressure."

The deep-buried resources of human nature are ignored in attempts of elements in our society today to lower the level of production. This is no advocacy of long working hours. I agree with the English labor leader, Frank Hodge, that workers should have "leisure for family life, education, recreation, a hobby." But I do urge you men to top-notch quantitative and qualitative effort during the hours of a normal day. "An honest day's work for an honest day's pay," the slogan of Mr. Schwab, is sound sense in science as it is in economics. Hard work physically will not endanger health, if decent hygienic cautions are observed.

Regarding the myth that hard work mentally causes brain disorder, let me cite the judgment of Dr. Boris Sidis: "I have not met a single case of nervous or mental trouble caused by too much thinking or over study. This is now the opinion of the best psychopathologists. What produces nervousness is worry, emotional excitement and lack of interest in the work."

St. Paul's advice to the Thessalonians is pertinent here: "Study to be quiet and

to do your own business and to work with your own hands."

Lehigh students, thanks to the exacting, persistent requirements of the faculty of this University, past and present, have in general developed a high rate of energizing. The demand has been hard work and lots of it and under this demand Lehigh men have grown in power.

We of Lehigh have an example of all this in the great leader who is now retiring from the presidency of the University. A driving energy has been the life-long characteristic of Henry Sturgis Drinker. Tributes to this energy have come from eminent co-workers in the national movements in which he engaged to the joint profit of the country and of our University. Tributes have come from students, faculty, alumni, trustees, friends of Lehigh—all who know what this energy has wrought upon the side of South Mountain in the external things—buildings and equipment, and likewise in the internal things—tone and morale. Our hearts go out in gratitude and love on this last day of his Presidency to Dr. Drinker, seventy years young, epitome of Lehigh.

Just as he has represented the Lehigh capacity for action so Dr. Drinker, in his devotion to cultural forces, represents Lehigh's best in the humanities. There could be no better exemplar to cite to you today.

I shall have erred if my statement of the importance of action has been so emphatic as to over-top the importance of reflection. The biological conception of the origin of man and the psychological study of the mind of man do not by any means invalidate the doctrine of the worth of the human soul. Spiritual things stand

out with no less significance in the light of science than according to anthropocentric ideas.

Action is good. But action without reflection may be but the hopping of a canary bird from one rung of its cage to another. We have action of that sort in the leaders of Mexico whom Senor Ibanez has been reporting. We have it in the type of engineer capable of performing an assigned job but incapable of initiating and executing in the larger sense.

You are doubtless acquainted with the trick of the movie directors by which pictures are taken, for example, of houses a few inches high swept by a flood through a miniature valley with mountains a few feet high in the background. Lacking standards of measurement the spectators believe they see a real cataclysm. Similarly, those lacking standards of measurement in economics, in philosophy, in literature, are often led to accept illusory theories and works as sound and important.

The one best way to obtain standards of measurement—to fortify oneself against intellectual whooping cough and mumps—is, of course, to familiarize oneself in youth with the masterpieces in given fields and to reflect upon them. Thus judgment is trained. I would like to hold before the Lehigh graduate the ideal set by Professor Quiller-Couch for the Cambridge graduate: "A man of unmistakable intellectual breeding whose trained judgment we can trust to choose the better and reject the worse."

Lehigh has never ignored the humanities. A department called the School of General Literature was an integral part of the University at its founding. Continu-

ing as the College of Arts and Science it is destined to grow with the College of Engineering and the College of Business Administration in the full flowering of Lehigh as a University. I look forward to seeing more electives in the humanities offered to engineering students and to seeing advantage taken of them.

Is it too much to ask of American engineers and men of business that they strive for the things of the intellect, of the soul. The theory of higher levels of energizing cited in regard to physical capacities applies also to mental capacities. All of us are capable of a wider range and loftier plateaus intellectually. It is a matter of desire and the use of leisure. If you men of the graduating class spend your hours after work in the conventional tea-dance, country-club sort of thing, you will be just one more group of American youth who fail in intellectual leadership.

In carrying to you water from our Bethlehem well and other wells, regarding action, I gave two tenets to remember. Let me, in regard to water from the wells of reflection, be equally specific.

Here are a few practical admonitions from Dr. Fullerton, Professor of Philosophy at Columbia, to young men willing to try the contemplative life:

1. Be prepared to enter upon a new way of looking at things.

2. Do not have too much respect for philosophic authority. Beware of schools of opinion with their narrowing tendencies.

3. Do not hastily accept a doctrine. Have patience and a willingness to accept the established order of things until one is very sure that one has attained to some truth—some real truth.

May I add to this the maxim of an informal philosopher of rare wisdom, Thomas Davidson, the man who urged us to "be on earth what good people hope to be in heaven." This was his final word to his class: "Never be satisfied until you have understood the meaning of the world, and the purpose of your own life, and have reduced your world to a rational cosmos."

We face troubled days. With the greatest of all military wars just over we hear on every hand of economic wars and rumors of wars. Whether we are, as Mr. Brooks Adams has speculated, in his brilliant "Theory of Social Evolution," upon the threshold of a new social era no living man can tell. I hazard the prediction that no changes in social organization will permanently come which will change integrity, tolerance, initiative, courage and work of *the individual citizen* as the fundamentals of civilization.

Those who have these qualities in pre-eminent degree will always be the leaders of mankind.

The union of action and reflection to which I have been urging you gentlemen of the graduating class will assuredly help you toward leadership. It has so helped many Lehigh men before you. May you join the ranks of those who deserve well of their country because by thought and by action they truly serve her.

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